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THE

FAITH OF A FREE CHURCH.

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"The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose." — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE

FAITH OF A FREE CHURCH.

THE CENTRE OF FAITH.

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." — 1 Thess. v. 21.

That a great change has taken place in the relations between the Church and the thinking world is evident to the most superficial observer. The real character of the change is not so widely appreciated.

In a general way it is felt that Church doctrine needs to be broadened and rationalized. Much learning has been expended in the attempt to reconcile science and religion. By this is often meant harmonizing certain generally accepted ecclesiastical dogmas with the results of scientific investigation. Of such a character are the attempts to read into the Book of Genesis the facts of geology, or to state the doctrine of regeneration in terms of biology.

Leaving the restricted sphere of Biblical theology, there are still greater subjects where the science of the day seems to challenge the beliefs of natural and universal religion. How to reconcile the doctrine of evolution with that of Divine Providence; how to reconcile what is known of the influence of heredity and environment in moulding character with the sense of personal responsibility to which religion appeals; how to reconcile what we know of the origin of man with what we hope in regard to his destiny, — these are important questions. And yet

the main question lies back of them all. If science meant simply a body of formulated fact which will always remain as it is, the Church could easily incorporate it into its body of divinity, and place upon it the stamp of infallibility. But both science and religion are forces, and each has its own laws and conditions. The underlying question is not one about transient results, but about processes and tendencies. Can the scientific temper and method exist harmoniously, in the same mind, with the religious temper and method?

This is a question not of scholarship, but of experience. It touches the point, not whether this or that religious doctrine shall survive, but whether religion and free investigation can breathe the same atmosphere. If they cannot, then a rational religion is impossible. And if there is to be a truly liberal church, one that is to be permanent, it must not simply proclaim what for the time may be considered rational thought, but it must allow room for continuous intellectual advance, while at the same time satisfying the religious nature.

That this is no easy thing we may be sure. Let us see what we mean by the religious temper and method, and what we mean by the scientific, or, if you will, the rationalistic, temper and method.

In order to get a glimpse of the working of a purely religious mind, one into whose monastic calm and ascetic purity the doubts of our modern time had never entered, let us go back to the ages of faith.

Thomas à Kempis writes thus in his "Imitation of Christ": "By two wings is a man lifted from things earthly, — by simplicity and purity. If thy heart be sincere, every creature will be to thee a looking-glass and a book of holy doctrine. Such as every one is inwardly, so he judgeth outwardly. If thou wert inwardly good, then thou wouldst understand all things. There is no other

way of life but the way of the holy cross, — the way of daily self-sacrifice. Why art thou so much inclined to outward things, so negligent of things inward and spiritual?"

Here we have the purely religious method of attaining truth. In no soul had the words of Jesus, "The pure in heart shall see God," been realized with such intensity as in this man who for seventy years verified the beatitudes in the monastery of Mount St. Agnes.

"If thou wert inwardly good, thou wouldst understand all things." Spiritual goodness is made the sole discoverer and judge of truth. The world that is rounded out in the soul of Saint Agnes, or mirrored in the calm, uplifted eyes of the Madonna, is the true world, God's world; all else is vanity. "Hold fast that which is good," — that is the whole of duty. The intellect has no function apart from the conscience. Its longing to prove all things, to know the evil as the good, its insatiable curiosity about outward things, must be repressed. It must learn to walk, with downcast eyes, "along the way of the holy cross."

But while the mystic, whose soft brown eyes took note only of the quiet world within the convent gates, was living a life hidden with Christ in God, men were awaking to the many-sidedness of the world that lay outside. John Huss was attacking the doctrines of the Church in Bohemia; rival popes were anathematizing each other from Rome and Avignon; the old Roman Empire was in its death grapple with the Turks under the walls of Constantinople; gunpowder was destroying feudalism, and making possible a new political order; the mariner's compass was guiding men on long voyages, and making possible the discovery of new worlds; the printing-press was diffusing everywhere the knowledge of good and evil; and revolution with flaming sword was driving men out of the old paradise of ignorance.

"Hold fast that which is good," said the sweet, pure voice from the monastery. "Hold fast the old sanctities. It is good to pray; it is good to renounce one's self, and in renunciation to find the peace of God." And from without came a thousand voices, — the voices of unrest, of new ambitions, of a strange sense of youth and power and daring, — the voice of the modern world breaking in on the quiet of the ages of implicit faith.

The worship of the good had never been preached more powerfully than in those ages, — goodness austere and alone, the goodness that renounced the world, crucified self, became blind to earthly beauty. But now, instead of this pure unity of the worship of the good, the old Greek trinity was revived; men would worship not the good alone, but also the true and the beautiful.

And with awakening thought the old baffling question, which had been silenced so long by fasting and prayer, came back, What is truth?

The world cried to the monastery, "Hold fast," if you can, "that which is good;" a more inspiring, a more strenuous task is ours, to "prove all things." Be yours the simplicities of piety; ours must be the bewilderments of discovery, the contradictions of freedom, the exhilaration of broadening horizons.

"Prove all things." That is the voice of the modern world, the watchword of its discoverers, its reformers, its revolutionists. All questions are open questions, says the scientific spirit; nothing is too holy to escape our analysis; we hold nothing to be so sacred that it shall not be put to the test. A new set of virtues is added to the calendar, — impartiality, open-mindedness, clear-sightedness, breadth of mind, and tolerance. One of our philanthropists uses the expression, "a rationalistic regeneration." The phrase is a telling one. Ye must be born again into reasonableness, as men have been born into faith.

Here are two distinct attitudes of the individual, — the one that of a simple, trustful piety, and the other the attitude of cool, impartial investigation. The one looks within, — meditates, examines its motives, distrusts its own will, but believes implicitly in the power of self-renouncing love. The other looks out, and not in, — studies the external world, traces its far-reaching laws, detaches itself from all preconceptions and prejudices, that it may be open to all facts. One spirit leads to writing the "Imitation of Christ;" the other, to the "Origin of Species" and the "Descent of Man."

The problem of religion in modern life is to unite these two impulses, — to wed the impartial intellect that dares to put all things to the test to the steadfast heart that holds fast to that which is good.

This is not an easy thing. "My heart is fixed, O God, — my heart is fixed;" that is the voice of religion. "Cast thy burden on the Lord. He will not suffer the righteous to be moved." It is no accident that makes the believer choose the rock, the fortress, the mountain, as his dearest symbols. Zeal, consecration, devotion, — these are not kindled by a vague "perhaps;" they demand the absolute and eternal. The martyr at the stake could better understand his persecutor, than he could the tolerant spectator who should treat his faith as an interesting hypothesis. The faith that overcomes the world is not something to be discussed, but something to be obeyed.

But the truth-seeker demands that the mind shall not be fixed; it shall be able to detach itself from its own opinions, and to look at them, and analyze, and criticise them. "Hold fast your beliefs," says one. "Do not grasp them too firmly," says the other; "touch them lightly; hold them tentatively; be ready to let them go when something better is within reach."

The fixed heart with its fidelities and the inquiring mind

with its questionings are not easily harmonized; and yet only in their harmony lies the possibility of a rational religion. And how shall that be accomplished? Not by any mere compromise, in which each is minimized into harmlessness. This is the weakness of mere latitudinarianism. It satisfies neither the intellectual nor the religious nature.

When a question of divided allegiance came before Jesus, he answered, "Give unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's." So we say, Let the steadfast heart have what belongs to it, and let the inquiring mind have what belongs to it. Each has its own method, which must be obeyed. One seeks to trace the ever-widening circles which define our knowledge of the world; the other fixes itself on the goodness which it finds at the centre. We discover and define facts by the method of science; we must doubt, analyze, test all things. But how do we know goodness? Not by such long processes, but by the direct judgment of our consciences. Something within us gives the verdict, and its validity depends upon the state of our own hearts. "Such as a man is inwardly, so he judgeth outwardly. If thou wert inwardly good, thou wouldst understand."

Here is a kind of knowledge different from mere intellectual acuteness. It may be "hidden from the wise and prudent, and revealed unto babes." It does not depend upon the analytic processes of science; it cannot detach itself from its object, and coolly criticise. To know goodness is to love it, to lose oneself in it, and to make it one's own. So the Christian apostle says that he only who loves God, knows God. Religion becomes rational, not by allowing this power of passionate attachment to cool, but by directing it to its proper object. "Hold fast that which is *good;*" but "take heed, dear heart, of this large privilege," and let not your loyalty be a shelter to

falsehood, or sanctify a mass of things indifferent. Confusion comes when religious emotion fixes itself on things not essentially religious.

Church organization is apt to add to this confusion by multiplying the non-religious elements. Questions of history, politics, philosophy, literature, even of taste, become associated in the minds of the worshippers with their most sacred emotions and deepest faith.

> "Even as the trees
> That whisper 'round a temple become soon
> Dear as the temple's self."

A sacred enclosure is formed, within which doctrines and customs are guarded with pious vigilance. Within its boundary the methods of impartial criticism are resented as sacrilege. This right of sanctuary, which protects in the Church opinions outlawed by the courts of secular reason, is a source of great abuse. Every year the right is more frequently denied, and the vagabonds of the intellectual world who can give no satisfactory account of themselves are held for trial "without benefit of clergy."

In the chapters which follow I endeavor to indicate the attitude of the Unitarian church toward some of the great faiths of Christendom. This church has never laid any claim to those ecclesiastical privileges of which I have spoken. It has held that religion needs no other defence than "the armor of light." It recognizes that intellectual questions must necessarily arise in all discussions of religion; but it teaches respect for the slow and cautious methods by which intellectual truth is discovered and verified. It respects the suspense of judgment which the serious thinker demands; but it teaches that this suspense of judgment need not imply an eclipse of faith. For our deepest faith rests not on an opinion to be inves-

tigated, but on a goodness which has been experienced. Our first effort should be to fix our hearts on a centre of goodness, and then we may leave our minds free to enlarge the circle of knowledge.

OUR FAITH IN CHRIST.

Nowhere does the contrast between the attitude of Christian love and that of rationalistic investigation appear more sharply defined than in questions in regard to the life and nature of Jesus.

One who has felt the meaning of the words, "The love of Christ constraineth me," shrinks from the historical critic as from one who would crucify his Lord afresh; and yet connected with the origin of Christianity there are many questions which are purely historical, — questions of fact which demand each to be considered on its own merits. But the believer is not willing to consider each on its own merits. Is the testimony for the raising of Lazarus conclusive? Can we be certain as to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel? Before these questions can be submitted to unbiased investigation, the whole pressure of a mighty emotion is brought to bear.

If Jesus did not perform miracles, what sanction have we for his teaching? If he is not very God of very God, then the goodness, the grace, the hope, the self-sacrifice of these Christian centuries have been in vain. You cannot judge here as you would judge of other things. All that you love, all that you live for, hangs trembling in the balance.

And so the believer, called to weigh evidence, breaks forth instead into the passionate Litany: "From all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from hardness of heart and contempt of thy word and commandments, Good Lord,

deliver us. By thine agony and bloody sweat, by thy cross and passion, by thy precious death and burial, by thy glorious resurrection and ascension, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost, Good Lord, deliver us. O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us."

Shall the Litany, with its appeal to sacred passion, be forever silenced, while we listen only to the verdict of a cold, judicial rationalism?

There is a voice of reason that is not cold. It says, "Hold fast that which is good." You cannot hold it too closely; only see to it that your vision is single, that your emotion goes straight to its mark, and finds the essential goodness which justifies its love. Read the Gospels again. Find what it is that makes your heart burn within you as you hear the story of all those things that happened in Jerusalem. What is it that attracts you, grows upon you, builds up within you a new life?

You have asked, Who shall show us any good? And the answer has come in a marvellous life. Whatever else is true, this, you say, is good. The patient toil in Nazareth, the temptations nobly overcome, the loving insight which made Nature one divine parable, the days of self-forgetting labor, the nights of prayer, the hope, the patience, the lowly wisdom, the final victory of the cross, — all these are good.

Once finding this centre of goodness, you are ready to investigate questions of theory and fact. This vision of transcendent grace is one which once seen will ever command your loyalty.

But where and how was this goodness manifested?

One says, The goodness which has enthralled you is the goodness of God miraculously manifested in flesh. "If this is so," you say, "with gladness I bow down and cry, My Lord and my God. It needs no further argument to

prove that God is good. Only I must hold fast to the centre of my devotion. The goodness I adore is not more real on the throne of the universe than it was in the carpenter shop of Nazareth. Here lay the emphasis of the Gospels. He that recognizes the power of goodness in the lowliest human form, he who has given a cup of cold water in its name, has done it unto the Highest."

But another says, "You are mistaken. The goodness you adore was not that of an incarnate God; it was the fair blossoming of humanity. A man like ourselves, ignorant of many things, limited in many ways, yet loving all things, enduring all things, hoping all things, has wrought 'with human hands the creed of creeds.'"

Here is something which you must consider. If this is true, there must be a readjustment of your thought. Yet the central power holds firm; the same love constrains you. All that compelled love still compels it; and out of the love of this man springs a great hope for all men. What he was we also may become, if we follow him. And a great faith in God surges back again into the heart. He was not very God of very God; but now that we have known him, we can never again believe that God is less loving nor less near to us than the image which we have seen mirrored in that pure heart. As we cry, "Our Brother!" a sudden stillness comes, and we join with him as he teaches us to pray, "Our Father."

But still the critical voice says, "Even this is open to question. Eighteen centuries have passed since Jesus lived. He who looks through ages looks through mists. We cannot be certain of those figures which loom so vast on the horizon's edge. We still have to consider how much is history, and how much is the work of loving imagination. There are those who in the Christ you love see not one well-defined historic personage, but the growing ideal of these Christian centuries."

Again must come questionings.

The mind must obey its laws; it must be prepared to prove all things, and to listen to all evidence; it must be willing to suspend judgment till it has investigated the facts.

For myself, I believe that the glimpses we have of the historic Jesus justify the spiritual ideal we have formed of him; but this belief must be founded on historic evidence. The faith of the soul in goodness is independent of this. It need not waver in its fidelity; it need not tremble lest impartial history should destroy what it loved.

If the story of the "highest, holiest manhood" is not history, then it is prophecy. Patiently let us wait, faithfully let us labor for its fulfilment. It shall be a light shining in a dark place until the day dawn and the day star arise in our hearts. "Still the soul sees the perfect, which the eyes seek in vain." We need not be tossed about by every wind of doctrine, and yet we need not fear to allow the winds full play. There is a Christian faith which is serene and free. It is like a perfect day.

> "When the genius of God doth flow,
> The wind may alter twenty ways,
> But a tempest cannot blow."

He who has given himself in full loyalty to the Christ-like life, finds something remaining steadfast through all intellectual change. Something, he says, I have found supremely good. If it is manifested in an incarnate God, I will worship Him; if it is manifested in one man, him will I follow; if it is manifested in a growing ideal of the race, I will give myself to that ideal, and seek to realize it. But whether in God, or man, or growing ideal, whether realized in time past, or hoped for in time to come, in whatever height of Deity it is, in whatever depth of suffering humanity, on it my heart is fixed.

OUR FAITH IN GOD.

"That we might be fellow-helpers to the truth." — 3 JOHN, 8.

I HAVE been often asked, What is the doctrine of your church concerning God? And I have found the answer difficult, because the question implies a false attitude and expectation. It is implied that a doctrine concerning God is the property of a church, and to be received on some ecclesiastical authority. "Show me your conception of Deity," it is said in effect, "and if it pleases me, I will accept it and worship with you."

Now, the first thing that needs to be said in reply, is that it is of very slight importance what definition any church makes. "The workman made it, therefore it is not God," is the argument of the prophet against idolatry. It is as conclusive against the idols made out of phrases as against those hewn out of stone. It is not the function of the church to furnish you with definite conceptions of Deity, or even with proofs of his existence. It does not exist that it may dictate to you what you shall believe, but that it may provide you with fellow-helpers to the truth.

If one should ask, what is your doctrine concerning sunshine, I could only say that we believe it is a good thing, and we try to get as much of it as we can. We have no means of manufacturing it, nor any esoteric teaching in regard to it. We are helpers to our neighbors when we persuade them to open their doors and windows, and to tear down some of the blank walls that shut it out. We have done a real service if we have shown them how a house may be built free from damp and gloom, and open on every side to the blessed life-giving rays.

So a liberal church need not be ashamed if, to many, its work seems largely negative and destructive. It is help-

ing to the truth when it tears down false conceptions which obscure the truth. It is making it possible for men to love God, when it makes it impossible for them to believe in a God of hate and anger. To multitudes the belief in God is a needlessly difficult thing. It means to believe in all the ideas current among Jewish teachers in regard to Jehovah, even when they describe him as angry, jealous, and revengeful. It means to believe in a God who, in order to fulfil his eternal purpose, must break his eternal laws. It means a belief in the metaphysical puzzle of the Trinity, and in the ethical enigma of the atonement. And still more difficult is the faith made when it is conceived of, not as the unconstrained recognition of evident truth, but as itself a magic charm to ward off the wrath of God, which will be visited on all who do not rightly believe in him.

We do good service when we break down these walls of darkness, sacred though they may seem to many. Faith in God does not depend on these things. In its essence it is the most simple thing in the world, in its growth the most natural. It is not an ecclesiastical manufacture, but a vital process, — our lives coming into contact with the eternal life. Come away, we say, from the gloomy council chambers where churchmen are formulating the faith which unless a man hold entire, he shall perish everlastingly. Come out into the common light of day, where men are facing reality and learning by experience.

What do they testify who have lived most nobly? What have the pure in heart seen? What filial confidence has come to the peacemakers? How have they been satisfied, who have hungered and thirsted after righteousness? What has the strong man discovered —

> "Who on with toil of heart and knees and hands,
> Through the long gorge to the far light has won
> His way upward and prevailed"?

This is the kind of testimony that we long to hear. It does not establish the metes and bounds of the Divine nature, but it assures us of a Divine reality in the universe. Those who have reached the heights of human goodness have recognized the existence of something higher and better than themselves. As the enlightened eye sees no bounds to space, so the enlightened conscience sees no limitation to righteousness. Those who have loved most deeply have been most certain of love eternal answering to their own. Human goodness recognizes a Divine goodness.

> "Do I task any faculty highest to image success,
> I but open my eyes, and perfection, no more and no less,
> In the kind I imagined, full fronts me."

God, we say, is the perfection of power, wisdom, righteousness, and love. He is that Being than whom no higher can be conceived. If this is so, then the struggle after perfection is the drawing nearer unto him. And faith in him is no strange, unnatural process, — it is simply opening our eyes.

> "What is true through me sings praises to the Truth,
> What is good through me sings praises to the Good."

Here we have something in which we can trust. The universe is a mighty sea. We cannot fathom it or bound it. But our little lives are upheld on its bosom, and we need not drift about without aim or hope. There are currents of spiritual power whose flow is constant, and to which our spirits respond. What is good in us points toward a supreme Good. Here is a compass by which we may direct our course.

Certain of this, we can afford to wait for the knowledge of many other things to come by slower processes. We need not be troubled because we cannot comprehend the

Infinite, nor because our thoughts of what He is like may change. Our symbols fail because knowledge grows. But the essence of worship is ever the same. The child rejoices in a goodness it has experienced, and through that comes to believe in a greater good beyond.

We have but to accept this natural piety, to keep it free from superstition, to give it the warmth of love and the light of thought; and it will develop into a natural faith of manhood. "Every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God." The familiar text has a meaning more absolute than that which we are apt to give it.

For consider what it is to know the law and inmost meaning of the home. How can one discern its purpose, and the spirit that is in it? The secret is hidden from the critical stranger; it is revealed to the child who has learned to love father and mother.

And in this larger home in which we dwell, who shall teach us the meaning and the law of it all? We cannot find it by simply wandering through the rooms or measuring the walls. The stranger or the critic can make little of it. But the universe becomes a true home to one who has learned to interpret it by love. This is the one method of interpretation that never faileth. Testing it by all the events and experiences of our lives, we come to trust it everywhere, and believe that —

> "Deep love lieth under
> These pictures of time;
> They fade in the light
> Of their meaning sublime."

Our intellectual conceptions of God are a series of dissolving views; but he that loveth hath caught the meaning into which they fade. So when the doubt comes, perhaps there is something greater than our thought of God, we are not troubled. Yes, there is something greater, — God is greater.

OUR FAITH IN MAN.

It will be seen that the faith in God of which we have spoken is dependent on a certain faith in man; and the attempt to build up a free church cannot be successful, unless human nature has religious powers and aptitudes.

The engineer cannot make his plans for a bridge without ascertaining the strength of his materials. Every new and loftier structure is an exhibition of intelligent trust. The fantastic heaps of earth of the mound-builders and the massive pyramids of Egypt are growths of the most rudimentary mechanical faith. Only after ages of experiment could one have the boldness to plan a tower overtopping the pyramids, constructed out of slender iron beams. So the institutions of the world, political and religious, illustrate the degree of confidence in the strength of the human materials out of which they are formed. Primitive institutions depend for their stability on their mass. Individuals are heaped together in dense aggregations. The social structure crushes out all freedom by its very weight.

Modern institutions, on the contrary, impress us with their lightness and elasticity. Strength is obtained, not by the mass, but by the quality of the material, and by the delicate adjustment of the different members. A constitutional government, with its balance of opposing parties and interests, involves principles similar to those which the engineer uses in building a great cantilever bridge. They are principles unknown either to the primitive builder or statesman. And so the idea of a church which shall admit and encourage freedom must seem chimerical to those who have no trust in human nature. And there are many difficulties in the way to this necessary faith. The creeds still proclaimed in most of the

churches of Christendom flatly contradict it. They say that though the first man possessed a nature inclined to good, he lost it by his fall. The fleeting radiance of the early paradise gave way to the blackness of darkness. Man's will is perverted: his reason is a false guide; his conscience is utterly depraved. There is no good thing in him, and unless supernatural grace comes to the rescue, he will live without God and die without hope.

And when one has escaped from this theological dogmatism he is perplexed by the revelations of science. He wants to find a complete doctrine of the total perfection of human nature and the infallibility of the reason of the natural man, with which to overthrow the doctrine of his total depravity. Instead of this, he is told of the humble origin of the race; and as he traces its history, he finds it a record of war and rapine, while the progress of religion seems to be through a maze of superstition.

Now, must all these questions of origin and history be settled before we can come to a practical working faith in human nature? If so, we must wait long. But a more simple and excellent way is open to us. It is the way suggested by Paul: "If there be any virtue or any praise, let us think on those things." The first thing to make sure of is not whether human goodness is universal and absolute, but whether there is any goodness at all. The misanthropist may be right in his catalogue of follies and crimes. We want first to make sure of just those items which he is likely to leave out. "What is the chaff to the wheat?"

Our business is not to elaborate a theory, — it is simply to find out what virtue there is. We want, first of all, to be able to recognize it when we come upon it, and then to cherish it and make the most of it. Here we see the helpfulness of a liberal religion. It means, primarily, a freedom from those prejudices which blind us to natural goodness.

Think of the effect of such doctrines as those of arbitrary election, miraculous regeneration, and the like. The believer is taught that the unregenerate man is a different creature from himself; that his heart is dead and cold, and that all his seeming generosity and courage and justice are but counterfeits. Only within the little circle of the saints can the grace of God be found.

A liberal church helps to a larger faith in man by ignoring these artificial lines of demarcation. It knows nothing of regenerate and unregenerate. All must stand on the same level, and be judged by the same standard. It does not attempt to divide men into two classes, calling one good and the other bad. It simply says, Whatever virtue there is, let us acknowledge it and cherish it. When we begin to look thus at our fellow-men, we are continually finding rare graces of the spirit where we had least expected them. Outside our little gardens wherein sheltered lives grow into beauty, we find wild flowers of religion springing up among the weeds and briars; and in desert places, standing in defiant loneliness, stunted and gnarled indeed, but unyielding in their fibre, we see the outgrowths of heroic virtue. We must not be morally or spiritually fastidious; we must cast aside our conventionalities and take people as they are, if we would learn how much of promise and power there is in human nature. We must be able to recognize nobility of the heart beneath rudeness of manner. There is a beauty in the cactus, that repels our approach, as well as in the violet, that invites it. For the cactus is the flaming rose of the desert, which brightens parched lands where nothing else can grow. So there is a rude, uncivil goodness which repulses sympathy, but compels admiration. We must not only pray for "all sorts and conditions of men," but try to understand and appreciate them. The Church has not yet learned how wide is that communion of the saints

in which it professes to believe. Nor do we always realize how much religion there is in the world which is not conscious of itself. It has grown up with little aid from ecclesiastical forms, and with no knowledge of ecclesiastical phrases. In ignorance and in weakness there is often cherished a piety which puts our pretensions to shame. When we see it, let us rejoice. What if the shy flower cannot be transplanted to our conservatory? Let it grow where God planted it.

That was a fine rebuke of the Christian apostle to meddling churchmanship, "The Lord knoweth them that are his." Yes, the Lord knoweth them, and as we grow in grace, we will learn to know them too, without looking at the labels. We will not be so anxious as we now are to reduce them all to our forms. Little Pippa singing in the streets to the sinful souls above, —

> "God 's in his heaven;
> All 's well with the world"

would not be more religious, if she were clothed in white and set to singing "jubilates" in the cathedral choir.

And so, too, our faith in the religious capabilities of man grows more strong as we rid ourselves of theological prejudice in the reading of history. Many of us were taught to distinguish between the true religion and the false religions of the world. The true religion is from God; the false religions are all human and show the hopelessness of all human effort. See, it was said, what the natural heart worships. Study the abominations of primitive idolatries. See the fires of horrid Moloch; see "the brutish gods of Nile," and the worshippers bowing down to stocks and stones. All is an evidence of the depraved instincts of the heart. And as to-day we read the history of religion in the light of science, the shadows are not less dark. What cruelty!

what superstition! We see the frenzied priest dancing before the altar where the human sacrifice is burning, and hear his incantation; and we say, "How horrible are these false religions!"

"But hold," says the historian; "this false religion, as you call it, claims close relationship with that which you call the true. Those who have watched most carefully are even inclined to think that the two are identical." Watch the growth of idolatry; see the fetich take form under the hands of rude artists. At last, wrought in purest marble, there stands in the temple an image of ideal grace and beauty. It has ceased to be an idol, and has become a symbol of the Divine. It is still only stone, but the stone has been idealized. At last temple and statue disappear. The workman ceases to make for himself a god. He realizes that he, himself, is God's image, God's temple; and so he worships in the beauty of holiness. So, as we watch the flaming altars, we see the time come when the father's hand is stayed, as he would offer his son as a sacrifice. He finds a substitute in a ram or a goat. Still we watch, and find the time coming when even this seems unworthy, and we hear one saying to his God, 'Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.'

As we watch the slow transformation, we fail to find a point where a line can be drawn and we can say, On one side all is false, on the other, all is true.

At first the thought comes in the form of a dreary scepticism in regard to all that we had before believed to be true. Perhaps, after all, our most spiritual faiths are but survivals of the intense impressions made on the savage mind. They may be but the ghosts of dead superstitions. When one is shown how Christian rites and doctrines can be traced, not only to Judaism, but to the most primitive Nature-worship, one feels that their

falsity is demonstrated. They have been developed out of false religions.

Here liberal Christianity comes to the rescue. It denies that, in the sense in which the term has been used, there ever has been a false religion. False theologies there have been, false explanations of religion, and false expressions of it. But religion itself has always been a reality. Religion is the life of the soul. It has risen from lower to higher by slow degrees. In its highest manifestations we recognize it, —

> "Breathing in the thinker's creed,
> Pulsing in the hero's blood."

But it is the same spirit which stirs the dull brain of the savage to devotion.

And the devotion of the savage is good, though its object may be mistaken. Men have worshipped devils, but not from a devilish impulse. Mariners have run their ships against the rocks; but not because they sought shipwreck, but because they were enveloped in fogs. Truth and not falsity, holiness and not sensuality, have been the desired havens, even for those who have made worst shipwreck. The history of religion is the history of the search after infinite good. In this high quest men have been hindered by their own sins, blinded by ignorance, led astray by superstition. Like the Knight of the Holy Grail, the disappointed seeker cries out, —

> "Thereafter, the dark warning of our King,
> That most of us would follow wandering fires,
> Came like a driving gloom across my mind,
> Then every evil word I had spoken once,
> And every evil deed I ever did,
> Awoke and cried: 'This quest is not for thee;'
> And lifting up mine eyes, I found myself
> Alone, and in a land of sand and thorns,
> And I was thirsty, even unto death,
> And I, too, cried: 'This quest is not for thee.'"

Religious history records many moments of such dark despondency. They form the pathetic undertone of the psalms, the solemn burden of the prophets. The taunts of the unbeliever in regard to the imperfections of religious faith and knowledge sound like tame understatements to one who has listened to the impassioned confessions of the saints.

But the wonder is that the quest has never ceased. Faith is born of failure. At last even superstitions become transparent, and we see the light of eternal truth shining through.

And another thought must be added. The same considerations which force us to acknowledge kinship with the lowest of our race, make us see that the highest are our brothers. The true humanity of the greatest and best men has been obscured by mistaken attempts to exalt them. This has been especially the case with the heroes of religious biography. The lives of the saints are made unreal, because all the natural and human elements are left out. Their purity and unselfishness are attributed to a miracle. We are taught to look upon their lives, not as the flowering of humanity, but as celestial visions, sent to shame us in our helplessness. "See what a perfect life is," it is said, "and realize how impossible it is that he who has attained it can be a mere man."

A strange argument this, as if the rose that comes to perfection should be esteemed less truly a rose than one that has been blighted in the bud. Humanity must claim its own. In the holiest lives it sees a revelation of its own possibilities. For life is one, and the highest types of manhood have been developed by slow degrees from the lowest.

The saints and prophets are but pioneers in the spiritual continent. The new land where now they walk alone shall in the days to come be full of happy homes, and what to them have been rare visions will be the familiar sights of every day.

OUR FAITH IN PRAYER.

"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us." — EPHESIANS iii. 20.

I WISH to speak about prayer, — about what it is, and what it does for us. And by prayer I do not mean any particular form of utterance, or necessarily any utterance at all; yet I would not use the word in any but its old and most familiar sense. I would follow the admirable definition of the Westminster Catechism, which is in substance, "Prayer is the offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will." Or we may follow the words of Montgomery's hymn: —

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;

. . . . .

"Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of the eye,
When none but God is near."

The essence of prayer is here found, not in any form of words which may or may not be used, but in the sincere desire, the upward looking, the sense of a divine presence and power.

Now, what place has all this in our lives? There are in our day many good and earnest people who frankly answer that it has no longer any place. The age of prayer, they say, has passed away; the age of work has come. We must no longer trust to the desire of our hearts; we will obtain only what our own brains can plan, and our own hands execute.

I have not called the people who talk thus blasphemers, but good and earnest people. Many of those who have

most sincerely devoted themselves to the service of humanity have yet come to look upon prayer as either having no meaning or else a false meaning. And I think that if we accept their idea of what prayer is, we must come very much to their conclusion. It is taken for granted that the attitude of prayer is exactly the opposite of that of manly self-reliance. They conceive of two powers in the universe, which work altogether apart from each other. On the one side is God, on the other is man. A certain work is to be done; and the man says, "I will not try to do this, — it is too hard for me; but I will ask God to do it for me." Here are poor people in distress; good people say, "It is not for us to search into the reasons for this misery, or to devise a remedy. Come, let us unite in prayer to the Infinite Goodness, and He will send help." Or there is a dry country. One man in it prays for rain; his neighbor digs irrigating ditches from the streams in the mountains, and so renders himself independent of the summer rain-fall. There is no need to ask which is the wise man. Of course the man who works succeeds, rather than the man who looks to some one else to do his work for him.

And if prayer means the putting off of the burden of responsibility, then there is justice in what is said against it. Such prayer has been accurately described as a "disease of the will." It is the attitude of a beggar and a coward.

But what if true prayer is something very different from this? Those who have prayed most devoutly have not thought of God as of a power altogether removed from themselves, nor have they thought of themselves as being able to work independently of him. Let us look more carefully at the words of the text. Paul speaks of a divine power "that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." Such a power we might

well wish to use. But how does it manifest itself? He answers, "*According to the power that worketh in us.*"

Is there, then, a divine power which works in us, and manifests itself through us? Let us see.

We look out upon the external world, and we see certain forces at work, — light, heat, gravitation, electricity. What are they? No man invented them. Before the first man was upon earth these forces were at work. They are manifestations of the creative energy by which the universe has been made to be what it is. They are divinely ordained forces ceaselessly weaving "the living garment of the Godhead."

But we consider ourselves and what goes on within our own organism. Here also is motion, and here are manifestations of force unspeakably more wonderful than motion. No man ever could have invented consciousness any more than he could have invented gravitation. Human life is simply a result. A result of what? Can we give any other answer than that it is the result of the working of that Infinite Power in which all things "move and have their being"? We speak of our own will and knowledge as if they had an independent origin; but before we can will anything or know anything this mysterious Power must have built up the organs of thought.

We then come to face this fact, — that there is a power greater than ourselves which yet manifests itself in us. Saint Paul prays for the Ephesian disciples that they might "apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." It may have seemed to them a very commonplace thing, this human love for one whose very nature called for love; but their teacher tells them that could they know all that was implied in it, they would find that it brought to them the very "fulness of God."

And so our life may not seem very wonderful to us. But could we see it as it is, — could we see the length of it, through what unknown ages the life forces have been developing, what an eternity awaits the race and the individual soul; could we see the breadth of it, how our life touches, in its relationships, all life; could we see how deep is the mystery of its origin, how high are the possibilities of its destiny, — we would no longer cry, "Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us." It would have already sufficed, and more than sufficed, to have seen what God hath wrought in his children. We would no longer cry, "Show us the far place where God works, that we may lay hold upon his power;" for we would hear the words spoken to us, "*Ye* are God's husbandry; *ye* are God's building."

"God is seen God
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul, and the clod."

God is God in the star. All silent we bow down before the glory unapproachable, the light ineffable. No cry of ours can cross the mighty spaces. But God is God in the soul; and to the God in the soul the soul cries for help. "Out of the depths do I cry unto thee!" It is deep calling unto deep; the deep of need calling to the deep of Power, — that is prayer.

And does such prayer come from a weakness of will? Rather, it is the very highest exercise of will. It is not the casting aside of our proper burden. It is the calling of all that is within us to aid us in bearing that burden; and it is based upon the belief that we have not summoned all that is within us till we have called upon the God who is working in us. For —

"Deep below the deeps of conscious being
Thy splendor shineth: there, O God, thou art."

When thus we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we mean that our heart's desire is that that kingdom should come in us

and through us; it is the opening of the gates of our souls, that the King of Glory may come in. The prayer, "Thy will be done," means, first of all, that we stand ready to do his will. The prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," is not the idle petition of the sluggard; for it must be answered "according to the power that worketh in us."

The attitude of prayer is not that of the ship-master who with anchor cast and every sail furled simply wishes himself in another haven. It is itself the lifting of the anchor and the spreading of the sail. It is each white sail crying, "Fill us, O winds of God, and we together shall cross the seas."

But if divine power works in us, would it not work alike whether we desire it or not? Does our prayer change anything? I think that we will find that the condition of receiving the highest good is that we seek it and ask for it. There are certain functions of life which go on automatically; but the higher functions rise into the region of consciousness and intelligent co-operation. The man ceases to be a blind instrument, and becomes a servant and at last a friend of God. It is enough for the tool that it lies without will of its own in the master's hand. The slave may serve in sullen silence; but he who feels himself to be a fellow-laborer with God seeks to commune with him. The best gifts come not unsought, and love is doubly manifested in the grace of asking and the grace of giving.

The goodliest guests do not force themselves upon us; they stand at the door and knock. Only when we open the door do they come in to us. We have life; but whether we shall have a deeper and more abundant life depends upon how sincerely we desire it. There are lives depressed below the level of the universal life, like the Dead Sea and the parched deserts which lie below the level of the ocean.

But the Dead Sea lies below the ocean level because it is shut out from connection with it. Once open a channel, and from remotest shores great waves would roll toward it, till it would be filled. If our lives are empty in a universe full of joy and power, it is because we have allowed the channels through which the most blessed influences might flow to us to become choked. Conscious prayer is the opening of our hearts that the tides of divine power may flow through us.

Saint James used no exaggeration when he wrote that the prayer of the righteous man "availeth much in its working." We never know what we can do or what we can endure until the consciousness of need has set every power to working.

Some summer afternoon you have been half asleep and half awake; every sense was dull and heavy. All at once a sudden demand was made upon you; something must be done, and done at once; and on the instant the blood pulsed more quickly through the veins, the muscles grew tense, the eye became clear, the ear became sensitive to every sound. A moment before your brain had been like a deserted mansion; through its winding corridors only dreams, the ghosts of thoughts, had been flitting. Now the doors are open, and the living world surges in. You see and hear and understand, first of all because you desire to do so.

And have you never seen, in time of great necessity, a transformation of character as complete as the change from sleeping to waking? Those who in common life had seemed weak and frivolous astonish you by their calm courage. Now first you know them; now first they know themselves. Only the surface of their nature had been seen before; but now in the sense of their weakness they have come upon the secret of strength. At the mighty cry of "God help me!" the "abysmal deeps of personality" are moved.

We wonder sometimes at the deeds of heroes and martyrs. What is it that makes the hero's blood to differ from that of other men? It is not the blood, it is the power that sets it pulsing, that makes him what he is. The men who gave their lives so nobly at Gettysburg and in the Wilderness were but common men. A few years before many of them would have shrunk from the smallest sacrifice; but the hour came when a new impulse took possession of them. They desired their country's good as they desired nothing else; and this desire transformed and transfigured them.

The first disciples of Christ were not men distinguished for intellectual attainments; but they were absolutely possessed by a great desire. One love constrained them; one purpose controlled them. Their very lives were mighty petitions unto God "for things agreeable to his will." In that pure fire all earthly fear and weakness were burned away; and they flamed forth pure spirits, ready to do all and dare all. Through such men God has ever wrought his mightiest works. "He maketh his angels spirits, his ministers a flame of fire."

There are many things which we say we desire, — more of justice and of kindness between man and man, better morals, purer lives. We ask, and we receive not. Is it not because we ask with but half our hearts? When we shall in very truth desire these things as each one of us desires his own welfare; nay, more, when we shall desire them as we desire no other thing in all the world; when we cry with one voice, "These things we must have, though we lose all else," — that cry will not be in vain.

When out of the sense of absolute need men shall unite in the prayer, "Thy kingdom come," then it *will* come.

OUR FAITH IN IMMORTALITY.

In Bunyan's allegory, as the two pilgrims lay in the dungeon of Doubting Castle, Christian suddenly cried out, "What a fool am I, to lie in a dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom called Promise, which will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle." Then said Hopeful, "This is good news, brother; pluck it out and try."

The promise which to Bunyan was the master key was that contained in certain texts of scripture, literally interpreted. But you, as you have lain long in Doubting Castle, have tried this key in vain. The authority of the texts themselves is a subject of sceptical inquiry. In vain you repeat the precious promises which once filled your soul with gladness. They are far-off and unreal. How do we know that Jesus thus spake, you say; and if he did, how do we know that his word is infallible?

As friends pass away from our sight, the old questions come back to us. Does our life, after all, end in nothingness, or is it a manifestation of something eternal? We turn eagerly to scientific and philosophic arguments, and yet they do not reach the point of demonstration.

But one thing is sure: Doubting Castle is not our home, and not without a struggle will we yield to Giant Despair. At length the thought flashes upon us that, in a deeper sense than Bunyan meant, the key called Promise lies in our own bosom. Not in a book, not in a voice from heaven, not in a labored argument, but in ourselves we must find it. Life is a sublime promise. The soul is itself the key which will open the locks of Doubting Castle. The word of a free religion is the word of Hopeful: "Pluck it out, brother, and try!"

But in the supreme emergency we do not trust ourselves to an untried means of deliverance. Those who think of death as something apart from all other experiences may well dread it. And the religion that makes the preparation for death an exercise that has little relation to the common work of life bears the stamp of unreality. Let us first of all take our life as a unit. What we want is not a way of escape from a single difficulty, but to be freed from the despairing temper; to be led from the dungeon into the sunshine.

In thinking of immortality, we are apt to get it in wrong perspective. We place in the foreground what God leaves in the background. We need to learn that "if we hope for that we see not, then must we with patience wait for it." The first lesson of religion is not in regard to the duration of life, but in regard to its quality. In fact, the belief in the endless duration of life may be so held as to be without religious significance. One man believes that he shall live ten years; another is confident that his life shall be prolonged for a century. Which belief, you ask, is the more religious? Ten years of loving self-sacrifice has more significance than a century of sensuous enjoyment. But if you multiply the century by infinity, the conditions of the problem are unchanged.

The religious conception of life begins with an appreciation of its present opportunity. "Beloved, *now* are ye the sons of God." The great emphasis must be put on our present sonship. Convinced of this, we may wait in all patience for the inheritance that fadeth not away. "If sons, then heirs" is the New Testament argument.

There is no magic in the opening of a door, but the key must fit the lock. And to one who believes in divine justice, the question of personal immortality resolves itself into a question of fitness. What is fit to live, will not perish.

To one who has learned the lesson of life, death does not come as a new problem. In a true sense we "die daily." Old things pass away, new difficulties face us. Giant Despair does not lie in wait only at our journey's end, — he is a familiar foe. There is a way of living and thinking that ends in despair. It is the superficial, worldly, selfish way. Sooner or later, when sorrow comes and personal disappointments, the man finds that he has been left in the darkness. But there is another way of life, and there have been in every age those who have found it. They have been cast down, but not in despair; and they have rejoiced even in tribulations. There is a trustful, loving, self-forgetful spiritual life; and this has found blessedness even in the midst of sorrow and loss.

Here is a key of promise. We pluck it out of our bosom and try it. One door after another of the prison of despair flies open at its touch. We see those who have endured poverty and hardships and pain, and yet have hearts overflowing with good cheer. Their lives have triumphed over difficulty. In them tribulation has wrought patience, and patience experience, and experience hope. With loving courage they have confronted Destiny, and the very prophets of ill have blessed them. The iron doors of their prison open into the garden of the beatitudes.

Now, one who has used the key to open so many doors, will try it when he comes to the last door, we call death. To him death presents no new problem. He cannot think of it as something apart. It is a step into the dark, but has he not been taking such steps all his life? And is not this the lesson he has been learning, how to walk in the dark courageously, never doubting but that God is there also? And so he faces death just as he has faced every other dark mystery.

"I was ever a fighter, so — one fight more,
The best and the last;
I should hate that death bandaged my eyes; and forebore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it; fare like my peers,
The heroes of old;
Bear the brunt; in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness, and cold,
For sudden the worst turns to best, to the brave."

This conviction that worst turns to best, to the brave, is one born out of the experience of brave souls. They have learned it in their struggles here; they carry the lesson with them in their supreme struggle. Preparing for death is not anything separate from the common work of life, — a noble life is one long preparation.

Can we not see how one convinced of this may face the future with serene confidence, though many of the common arguments for immortality may seem to him inconclusive? For human life itself is a reality so wonderful and full of promise that it makes these arguments seem superfluous. The life of the spirit transcends the explanations that are given of it. In its presence our common doubts seem shallow, and bear with them their own refutation. The soul may be "the unanswered question," but still we say, —

"Ask on, thou clothed eternity;
Time is the false reply."

Can you not see the place which the hope of immortality has to those who believe that it rests not on "the law of a carnal commandment, but on the power of an endless life"? We believe in the immortal life because we feel that we are moved by it.

People ask, If you do not accept the proofs which the churches usually offer, what foundation have you for your immortal hope?

I would answer, This hope does not rest, or need to rest on any *foundation* at all. By this I do not mean that it has no reason for being; I mean that the word "foundation" brings in a misleading idea. We say that a building is upheld by its foundations; that is, the natural tendency of each stone would be to fall to the earth, but the solid masonry under it holds it up. We take it for granted the natural tendency of the soul is all downward. What foundation have we on which it can be upheld?

You know how many answers are given: Because the Church says so. Because the Bible says so. Because Jesus rose from the grave. For myself, it is easier to believe in immortality directly, listening to the promise of the life itself, than to believe many of the "proofs" on which it is supposed to rest.

After all, this search after foundations is always baffling. A house is founded on the rock; the rock is founded on the very framework of the world; but what is the world itself founded on? It has no foundations, but is upheld by invisible power in the midst of space. And so if you ask what foundations have our hopes or faiths, — thinking of them as things which, like the stones of a building, must have visible support or fall, — the answer is hard. But hope is not like a stone, falling to earth of its own weight; it is upheld as the earth is upheld in space, or as a bird in the air, by the forces which impel it onward.

And what are these? I think that we will find that the forces which impel us to the fulfilment of our nature, to the doing of our duty, to gaining the highest good here, are the same forces which sustain the hope of a blessed immortality. They keep us in a frame where it is easier to believe than disbelieve.

We try with all our heart to do right; we fail; death seems to shut out all hope. But the very impulse which leads us to try again leads to the unquestioning hope

that in spite of death our lives shall fulfil their promise; it goes right through death to "the new heavens and the new earth in which dwelleth righteousness." And so our love for human friends impels us to refuse to believe that they cease to be when we cease to see them; and our love for all beautiful and good things urges us in the same direction. All this is not a logical foundation; it is something more, — it is the power, the impulse, which impels us to hope.

To a person who should say, "I not only see no *reason* for believing in immortality, but I never felt any *prompting toward it;* now, I want you to prove it to me," I could say nothing, any more than to one who should say, "I never loved anything, but I want you to prove to me that there are sufficient foundations to support love."

But if one says, "I love, but I want to know whether I have a right to cherish this love," then some kind of an answer can be given. And so it is when one says, "I have felt a mysterious influence drawing me to hope for a good which the grave cannot destroy. Something whispers to me that even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I need fear no evil. Ought I to believe this voice? Ought I to obey this influence?" The question then becomes a comparatively simple one. Here is a force impelling us onward. Shall we trust ourselves to it, or shall we resist it, and seek to crush it out? It is not a question whether we shall be able to create or uphold the force, but simply whether we shall allow it to uphold us.

Here first the office of reason comes in. It does not create the desire or the hope; it finds it already existing. It simply passes judgment on it, and says whether it is trustworthy or not. If we find that the impulse which urges us to hope for immortal life has its origin in mean and selfish emotions; if it is fed by what is base in us;

if, so far as we can trace its effects, it leads to the neglect of those things which are best in the present life, — then we are right in saying, "Here is an impulse which is strong within us, but it is one to which we will not yield."

If, on the other hand, we find the power of hoping and believing in infinite good to be a force generated in our highest experiences; if it is strongest when we are strongest, clearest when our vision of present right and duty are clearest; if the future life seems most certain when the present life is at its highest point, — then I think that the only thing that remains for us is to trust this power, and allow ourselves to be borne along by it.

The "future life" is with God; we must leave to the future the knowledge of its conditions. But "the power of an endless life" is something of present experience. To live at all is to hunger for larger living. To be conscious of ourselves is to be conscious that we are but the germ of what we may be, that we have scarcely begun to fulfil the promise of our nature. The path of duty seems at first to be a straight line; but we cannot long follow it without being convinced that it is a circle, whose centre is God. One cannot throw himself with all the force that is in him into any noble undertaking without being carried by the sheer momentum which he has gained beyond the fear of death. In fighting a good fight "death is swallowed up in victory."

In all this we are simply learning to trust what "is likest God within the soul;" we are holding fast that which we have found to be good.

The first word of religion, let us repeat, is not in regard to the duration, but in regard to the quality of our lives. It does not first say, Believe that life is everlasting; but it says, Live, — live bravely, unselfishly, reverently, with eyes ever open to whatever of good may appear; and having done all this, "let not your hearts be troubled."

Having tested the value of life, trust in its promise. Believe in the lesson your own experience has verified. When death comes, face it as you have faced every other dark shadow; and doubt not but that again you will learn how "sudden the worst turns to best to the brave."

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